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Yeats's presences

Abstract

W.B. Yeats was the son of a portraitist of exceptional gifts. This essay ponders the argument, and at rare moments the agreement, between father and son in relation to poetry's ability to provide a reader with the (illusion of the) real presence of people and things. Such a sense is rare in Yeats's writing but not unknown—and it is always thought-provoking. The essay examines important occasions of such presence and finds them most conflicted in poems addressing the Easter Rising and the Irish Civil War. It is in the poetics of presence, the essay concludes, that something of the real aesthetic divisions between John Butler Yeats and William Butler Yeats can be felt.

Yeats's presences

‘no clear fact to be discerned’¹

William Butler Yeats grew up among portraits. John Butler Yeats (1839-1922), the poet's father, had abandoned a career in the law—with all its promise of wealth and status—in preference for art. Now recognized as one of Ireland's most accomplished painters and draughtsmen, John

¹ ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan), p. 425, l. 9. All subsequent references to Yeats's poems are from this edition, given as V/, followed by page then line numbers.

Butler Yeats's fame was one he barely knew in his life-time. As well-known for erasing his work and starting again, as he was for not finishing it, John Butler Yeats gave to his son a childhood and early manhood of insecurity and, often enough, poverty. And he did so in ways that might have left the poet unable to write of his father except with anger. Yeats, like Susan Pollexfen (1841-1900), his mother, expected better. But John Butler Yeats gave also to his son the memory of permanent—though also, alas, impermanent—images and this, in various ways, mattered. Matthew Campbell, in his absorbing book, *Irish Poetry Under the Union: 1801-1924* (2013), takes John Butler Yeats's inability to complete work—his impermanent images—as a suggestive starting point for comparing the poetics of Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-89) with Yeats's.² But that, as Professor Campbell rightly notes, is only one of the ways—a peculiarly forgiving way from Yeats's perspective—in which it is possible to think of the relationship between son and father. Another dimension of that relationship is the topic of this essay.

We know much of what Yeats inherited from his father—and something, now, of what the father might have inherited from his son. Colm Tóibín has most recently told us, on this latter point, about John Butler Yeats's peculiar emotional attractions to unfulfilled love.³ We know, certainly, of an inheritance in the other direction that concerned the relationship between art and emotion: as Ezra Pound's selection of John Butler Yeats's letters revealed, the painter was committed to a conception of the aesthetic where '[d]esire and not emotion is the substance of art'.⁴ That might well sum up much of the poetry John Butler Yeats's son wrote about Maud Gonne (1866-1953). We know, more generally, of the atmosphere of single-minded dedication to art that John Butler Yeats created in his (often cold and always rented) house, repeatedly declaring, as his late biographer William M. Murphy neatly phrases it, the conviction that 'art was more important than mechanics, [and] that the function of the complete man was to be an artist,

² See Matthew Campbell, *Irish Poetry Under the Union: 1801-1924* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 157-83.

³ See Colm Tóibín, *Mad, Bad, Dangerous to Know: The Fathers of Wilde, Yeats and Joyce* (London: Penguin, 2018), Ch. 2.

⁴ Ezra Pound, ed., *A Selection of Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats* (Dundrum: Cuala Press, 1917), p. 1.

a role which required the acceptance of the primacy of “intensity” and “sincerity”.⁵ William Butler Yeats would accept, and celebrate, the idea of the primacy of art, the search for beauty, just as he would also accept his father’s doubtfulness of logic and rationality. John Butler Yeats had not infrequently asserted, as *The Bookman* reminded its readers in October 1918, that “clamorous and confident argument are the resources of the intellectual half-breed”.⁶ Such views are not dissimilar to Yeats’s aspiration that others, including his own daughter, should think opinions are accursed.

But the dialogue of, the intellectual trafficking between, father and somewhat vexed son that interests me here concerns the presence in Yeats’s poetry of—presence itself. Much of John Butler Yeats’s work, finished and unfinished, in oils and charcoal chiefly, comprises depictions of real people: children, men, women. John Butler Yeats was, as he remains, a portraitist of genius. Growing up among representations of living men and women, vividly realised by an artist for whom sketching people was almost a compulsion, Yeats from early on inhabited a world in which the visual arts were known to him as records of the actual, caught in a moment. What John Butler Yeats’s charcoal did was to give the impression of a captured essence, a version of the inscape of an individual—whether, for instance, his young son asleep, his sorrowful wife, the dignity of John O’Leary’s head, or the loveliness of Lily Yeats. Hopkins, at Katharine Tynan’s suggestion, once called on John Butler Yeats in his St Stephen’s Green studio to discuss the painter’s theories of art (a moment of knocking on the door that tells us, perhaps, something of Hopkins’s curiosity, loneliness, and, it might be, gaucheness). We do not know what they might have talked about. But Hopkins’s unique critical vocabulary is, though, not inappropriate, as I have already implied, for John Butler Yeats, a portraitist aspiring to offer his viewers instress: the experience of the living presence of an individual; character isolated by an artist’s deed. This is

⁵ William M. Murphy, *Prodigal Father: The Life of John Butler Yeats (1839-1922)* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 134.

⁶ ‘John Butler Yeats’, *The Bookman*, 55 (October 1918), pp. 18-19 (p. 19). The article is quoting ‘Why the Englishman is Happy’, included in John Butler Yeats, *Essays Irish and American, With an Appreciation by Æ* (Dublin: Talbot, 1918), pp. 37-50 (p. 48).

what George Russell (*Æ*) recognized when, in his appreciation of John Butler Yeats, he spoke of ‘nature’s best gift to him’ being a ‘humanity which delights in the humanity of others’.⁷

So it is thought-provoking to ask what William Butler Yeats does with *this* inheritance—there for the taking, there for the refusing, or somewhere in between. What is Yeats’s relationship with the idea of art, his father’s idea of art, as capable of giving us the sensation of the luminous reality of presence? Thought-provoking because the first thing to say about Yeats’s relationship with the illusion of presence—either of people or of place—is that, for much of the time, such presence is not his concern. It is much easier to speak, in fact, of ‘Presence’, with a capital letter, in relation to Yeats—the Yeats of the Order of the Golden Dawn, of Yeats the believer in magic. These Presences *are* important—as Kathleen Raine has sensibly discussed⁸—when they refer to the occult, mysterious, and possibly mathematical forms that Yeats thought poetry could summon up: the ghostly adherents. But presence in my sense is not this. And it is not the obvious category to have in mind when reading Yeats. His poetry, particularly before *New Poems* (1938), is—to speak in generalised terms—involved primarily with what Sir Frank Kermode (1919-2010) called, in his study of Yeats, the romantic image.⁹ And these images, Yeats’s version of symbolism, take the reader beyond the local and the particular into the demesne of the emblematic and (if the word has any meaning) the mystical. We are amid Arthur Symons’s sense that the modern symbol is the antithesis of the merely realistic.¹⁰ Whatever else Yeats’s early image-/symbol-based poetry does, it aspires only rarely to clinch the exactness of a moment, a person, or a location.

Yeats’s poetry at the beginning is, to say something obvious where personality is concerned, populated not by historical people but mythical ones. The representation in poetry of these figures, drawn mostly from ancient Irish legend cycles, provides not realised individuality but

⁷ John Butler Yeats, *Essays, Irish and American*, p. 5.

⁸ See Kathleen Raine, *Yeats the Initiate: Essays on Certain Themes in the Work of W.B. Yeats* (Maryland: Barnes and Noble, 1990), pp. 295-330.

⁹ See Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957).

¹⁰ See the contention of Arthur Symons’ *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1899).

forms of cultural common property—or what Yeats thought ought to be common property: Fergus and Deirdre, Cuchulain and Red Hanrahan, Fionn, Gráinne, and Diarmuid. It was this Celtic Revivalist manner that Joyce had such fun with in the ‘Cyclops’ episode of *Ulysses* (1922) and Flann O’Brien likewise in *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939). No one could think of, say, Yeats’s ‘Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea’ (1893), as a *portrait* of the maddened king, or sense through the poem a real individual. Yeats’s maddened ruler has less literal life, certainly, than, say, Standish O’Grady’s account of his historicity, and burial place, in *History of Ireland* (1880).¹¹ Oliver Sheppard’s bronze statue of the death of Cuchulain, now in the General Post Office on O’Connell Street, is no more a depiction of an actual person, a person whom one might know, than Yeats’s poetic shaping in words a combination of memory and power rather than a man.

But it is not only the early Celtic Revival poems that elevate character through symbols and images, or establish mythic grandeur against a sense of perceived individuality. Take, for example, another early poem, ‘The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love’ from *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). Here, in lines about Yeats’s permanent love and impermanent lovers, the personal is made into the impersonal (a point of comparison with T.S. Eliot). Exactness, though it lies under the surface of the poem, is secondary to a kind of lofty abstraction of the generalised:

Pale brows, still hands and dim hair.

I had a beautiful friend

And dreamed that the old despair

Would end in love in the end:

She looked in my heart one day

And saw your image was there;

She has gone weeping away.

¹¹ See Standish O’Grady, *History of Ireland*, 2 vols (London: Samson, Low, Searle, Marston, and Rivington, 1880), volume 2, Ch. 4.

(V, p. 152, ll.1-7)

What might the original reader have made of these lines? Even the poem's title, with its definite articles, moves that reader away from the local and specific. If the reader does not know, and few first readers would, that Yeats is writing about the English novelist, and his first lover, Olivia Shakespear (1863-1938), they might want to ask: so, then, who *is* 'The lover'? The poem has a kind of William Morris-like romantic vagueness: one that is shared by, among others, Æ and the Rhymers of the Cheshire Cheese. And, likewise, who is 'she', and who the 'image'? The movement of, or rather between, the first two lines suspends us in uncertainty too: who has the pale brows (and why is it 'brows' not 'brow' as Yeats had it in the first printing in *The Dome*? See V, p. 152n). Is that first line describing the lover or the loved? And 'dim hair' is peculiarly calculated to make a visual image hard to visualise with any particularity. What colour, for this short-sighted poet, might be 'dim hair'? What clarity do we receive, in further visual terms, from that final line: an unnamed woman weeping as she leaves? Does that summon a clear mental image? The last word, 'away', clinches—if that is quite the right word—what the poem has given us more generally in terms of realisation: its conclusion is a term of absence.

Yeats's enthusiasm for the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in his early years might have suggested that this aesthetic of the symbol, the generalised, or, in negative terms, the inexact, was not what he aimed at. The PRB, among its several initial commitments, included painters—John Everett Millais (1829-96) and William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), primarily—differently dedicated to the representation of the actuality of the material world. Such dedication is what John Ruskin (1819-1900) had, after all, admired—albeit hesitatingly—in his early defence of the Brotherhood's achievements and their truth to nature. But, revealingly, Yeats's conception of the PRB, which he consistently linked with both William Blake and, sometimes, with Shelley, was not for their fidelity to nature. It was much more to do with their privileging of beauty (like John Butler Yeats) than with a Millais-like attentiveness to the *verité*.

My discussion so far might be said to be simply an elaborate way of defining, or defending, a Freudian commonplace. So far, all I might have been confirming is that the self is in part worked out in relation to the father; that rejection—the slaying where three roads meet—is a serviceable model for human development, if develop is what human beings do.¹² Where John Butler Yeats offered the illusion of the presence of the real, his son thought art's subject matter was, for the most part, not to do with such presences. Yeats's poetry was not about focused visions of personality, the representation of thisness, including the sense of the realised vitality of place and things. William Butler Yeats, resisting, kept the world at an arm's distance through an aesthetic that found little imaginative inspiration from the locally observed.

But that is not entirely true. Sometimes, the illusion of the presence of the real world and of real people, of real places and real things, *was* important to Yeats. And that most particularly in the last twenty years of the poet's life. Yeats makes little sense without thinking of opposites or without considering William Empson's ambiguity of the seventh type. Yeats is Empsonian in this respect and he is also Blakean. Yeats does not shy from the fact that two contrary things can be true at the same time—nor from the fact that it is in such contradiction that fuller truths can be expressed or at least sensed. So it is that the general *and* the particular, the emblematic *and* the portrait, do, at times, both matter on a few notable occasions in the years from *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) onwards. Late Yeats, every now and again, offers us the poetry of (the illusion of) presence in my sense, of something more vividly actual than the mythic or the emblematic, of something more definite than the romantic image, even as he continues to be entranced by such images. These are not common features of his writing, and at one point in his poetry his interactions with the presences of the real are conflicted: in times of war they are more than bothered. But elsewhere presence in Yeats's work gives us briefly a different experience from the

¹² On this last point, see Adam Phillips, 'Contingency for Beginners', *Winnicott Studies*, 8 (1993), pp. 31-46.

familiar that reveals something of the inner arguments and accommodations he made with his father about the supreme subject of art and song.

Here, then, in an intriguingly Millais-like scene, is the beginning of ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’, from the volume of that name of 1919, where Yeats remembers the—as it happens—nineteen years in which he has known Lady Gregory’s estate (19-19-19). Yeats is far away from the mythical method of the Celtic Twilight poems, and unusually, in a few words only, concerned with the visualizable presence of a view:

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
 The woodland paths are dry,
 Under the October twilight the water
 Mirrors a still sky;
 Upon the brimming water among the stones
 Are nine-and-fifty swans [...]

(*V*, p. 322, ll.1-6)

The writing is unusually attentive to a specific space at a specific time (the grounds of Coole Park, though not the house, still remain). The woodland paths at Coole are dry, the water reflects back the October sunset, and the poet has paused to count this enormous number of birds. He figures himself being exact, being mathematically observant. The act of mirroring is, too, not obscured: the sky is mirrored in the turlough—the temporary lake that is almost unique to the west of Ireland—as Yeats’s language describes its business of mirroring. And there is also exactness in ‘brimming’, a word that allows the reader to envisage with clarity the lake’s stony edge almost being lost to water, a lake on the verge of spilling over, just as the swans themselves will sometime figuratively spill out, departing for elsewhere (as the lake itself will disappear in drier weather). Acknowledging that mysterious point ahead in time, and the unreachable secret

motivations of the great white birds, Yeats's poem reaches out in the end to the other-worldly, for certain: the swans, not least, come to figure some form of history's curious patterns and cycles. But the other-worldly is not where the stanzas begin.

In this rare species of Yeats's writing, with its watchfulness of the specific, there is a peculiar form of recognition: an awareness of poetry as a kind of meeting. Verse, so to phrase it, makes an introduction to. As we read, language trades with actual things as if effecting a rendezvous between us, the readers, and the things themselves—swans, for example, dry woodland paths, brimming water. Poetry momentarily becomes a way of seeing something real, a practice of noticing that which has empirical solidity, in a form we acknowledge more because, for Yeats, of its unusualness. 'Wild Swans' brings a place into poetry. But for the poet, like his father, a conception of art as effecting an introduction to, of wanting to facilitate a greeting of, is at its most visible where human beings are concerned. Here is my topic, the poetry of human presence, for the rest of this essay.

Yeats's late writing has a peculiar ability to depict friends and acquaintances with, as it were, a few verbal brush-strokes. And those strokes can leave us with defining, defined, moments of memory: Yeats's poetry trades with the illusion of realized human presence, reanimated out of days that are gone. 'Nothing is intelligible without the past', says Adam Nicolson in his recent book on Sissinghurst, 'not because it is the past but because it is the missing body of the present'.¹³ Yeats's conjuring poetry aspires to bring a sense of actual bodies, of human intelligibility and there-ness, back. Take the celebrated opening lines, for example, of 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz' from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933): 'The light of evening, Lissadell, | Great windows open to the south, | Two girls in silk kimonos, both | Beautiful, one a gazelle' (V, p. 475, ll.1-4). On their own, those four lines have a clearness of vision, of living people, which owes something to Imagism. Eva Gore-Booth (1870-1926) and

¹³ Adam Nicolson, *Sissinghurst: An Unfinished History* (London: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 32.

Constance Markiewicz (1868-1927) are permanently associated now with those words: we can hardly think of them without Yeats's description. Lissadell (the accent is on the last syllable) in addition can hardly be visited without them either. Yeats more generally gave to Ireland phrases, a 'terrible beauty',¹⁴ 'Great hatred, little room',¹⁵ which have become necessary in narrating her history. But the exactness, and aptness, of the striking phrase is at its most memorable when it creates the impression of human presence. (Though there is a qualification to be made here about 'In Memory', and it is in the choice of the word 'gazelle'. That, to my inner eye, so to speak, does not offer a very exact sense of a young woman's form or beauty other than a general implication of nervous gracefulness. This is not the equivalent of, say, 'brimming', in 'The Wild Swans', in its clarity. Perhaps, though, once one has decided that 'Lissadell' should be a rhyme word, the options are not many.) The two girls are caught in time in the poem, as if in a verbal photograph, with the great windows open, leaving a lastingly recollectable description, situated by the poem between the verbal and the visual.

And Yeats's personal history in *New Poems* was, more generally, to involve similar presences, made, as it were, seeable in verse. Consider this photograph-album-in-words, for instance, with its stills of individuality, where Yeats turns the poetry of portraiture into writing that is figuratively like silver nitrate plate and, indeed, early cinematography, for some of the images are moving:

Beautiful lofty things: O'Leary's noble head;
 My father upon the Abbey stage, before him a raging crowd:
 'This Land of Saints,' and then as the applause died out,
 'Of plaster Saints'; his beautiful mischievous head thrown back.
 Standish O'Grady supporting himself between the tables

¹⁴ 'Easter 1916', *V*, p. 392, l.16.

¹⁵ 'Remorse for Intemperate Speech', *V*, p. 506, l.12.

Speaking to a drunken audience high nonsensical words;
 Augusta Gregory seated at her great ormolu table,
 Her eightieth winter approaching: 'Yesterday he threatened my life.
 I told him that nightly from six to seven I sat at this table,
 The blinds drawn up'; Maud Gonne at Howth station waiting a train,
 Pallas Athene in that straight back and arrogant head:
 All the Olympians; a thing never known again.

(*V*, p. 577, ll.1-7)

This *is* character isolated by a deed, a way of making portraiture—setting aside the cinema issue—into a form of personal history writing. The figures are, eventually, turned into the mythic, for sure: they become Olympians in that last line, a momentary reminder of the old idea that the founders of the Irish people came from Greece, which Joyce exploited so interestingly in *Ulysses*. In this turn to the mythic, the poetics of 'Beautiful lofty things' is not removed from the earliest volumes of Yeats's career, when he still believed in the idea that a 'Union of Culture'¹⁶ could be obtained by returning to the ancient legends, to the figures of myth rather than of personality and presence. But the visual quality of 'Beautiful lofty things', its sense of individuality captured in a phrase, belongs not with Yeats of the Celtic Twilight but with what John Butler Yeats captured with paper and charcoal: the illusion of bidden personality. 'Beautiful lofty things' is a distinctive text of calling—of reaching out through words to real men and women whom the poem desires the reader not to comprehend but apprehend. 'Rarely has he pourtrayed [*sic*] anyone', Æ said of John Butler Yeats, 'young or old, where something like a soul does not look at us through the eyes'.¹⁷ And his son, long after his father's death, was occasionally possessed by a version of this capacity too in his long, unresolved *pas de deux* with

¹⁶ W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 295.

¹⁷ John Butler Yeats, *Essays, Irish and American*, p. 5.

the aesthetics of his father. In ‘Beautiful Lofty Things’, Yeats envisages, for an instant, men and women who can be represented in their wholeness—that is, the illusion of their wholeness—by a few verbal brushstrokes. Portraiture and poetry are not always uneasy with each other.

These acts of verbal engagement with the illusions of identity are, for Yeats himself, nowhere more plain, and nowhere more related to the paternal, than in ‘The Municipal Gallery Revisited’, again from *New Poems*. This celebrated text is, implicitly, a truce-making with John Butler Yeats, dead those sixteen years: a coming to an accommodation with. It is as if Laius had not been killed after all. A reflection on pictures hanging in what is now the Hugh Lane Gallery in Parnell Square, Yeats’s intimate-public text makes painted images fungible: they are exchangeable with real people in an economy of substitution across the threshold of the grave. If, anywhere in verse, Yeats expresses himself as a poet of portraiture, it is here.

The first gesture of ‘The Municipal Gallery’ is to record pictures that do not match the poet’s memory of his youth. What he sees initially are images of an Ireland that is, he wryly remarks, one that has been invented by the poets (he might well be thinking of his early activities with the mythological poems of the Celtic Twilight). But it is people of Yeats’s own experience, remembered from his own life, that, as the poem continues, bring him to his knees with an almost overwhelming feeling of recognition. ‘Heart-smitten with emotion I sink down,’ Yeats writes,

My heart recovering with covered eyes;
Wherever I had looked I had looked upon
My permanent or impermanent images:
Augusta Gregory’s son; her sister’s son,
Hugh Lane, ‘onlie begetter’ of all these;
Hazel Lavery living and dying, that tale

As though some ballad-singer had sung it all;

Mancini's portrait of Augusta Gregory,

'Greatest since Rembrandt,' according to John Synge;

A great ebullient portrait certainly;

But where is the brush that could show anything

Of all that pride and that humility?

And I am in despair that time may bring

Approved patterns of women or of men

But not that selfsame excellence again.

(*V*, p. 602, ll.17-32)

Here, it might be, is something of John Butler Yeats's voice: 'A great ebullient portrait certainly' could be a memory of the kind of thing Yeats's father might have said.¹⁸ (Note, in these lines' first publication in *A Speech and Two Poems* (1937), the adjectives were reversed: *V*, p. 602n). A voice assessing, politely but definitely, the legitimacy of Synge's view of Antonio Mancini's depiction of Lady Gregory, still hanging in the Hugh Lane: it is the kind of conversation that Yeats was familiar with from home.

More generally, these lines hint in their verbal habits at a more subtle connection between father and son. One of their striking features is Yeats's repetitions, sometimes literal, sometimes acoustic: '**Heart**-smitten ... my **heart**'; 'Wherever **I had looked I had looked**'; '**permanent** or **impermanent**'; 'Augusta Gregory's **son**; her sister's **son**'; 'ballad-**singer** had **sung**'; '**all** these ... sung it **all** ... **all** that pride'; '**portrait** ... **portrait**'; '**Greatest** ... **great**'. This is not, as one might think, clotted or impeded language. Rather, these recurrences, it seems to me, are a feature of a

¹⁸ I do not mean *about this picture*. John Butler Yeats departed to New York in 1907 and Mancini's portrait was completed only in 1908. I mean simply to speculate on the manner or nature of what might have been John Butler Yeats's most characteristic pronouncements on paintings.

poem that is retaining something. Yeats makes much of repetitions throughout his writing: it is the matter, perhaps, of his own distinctive tryst with disappointment.¹⁹ But, here, the recurrence of terms adds to the peculiar sense of poetry in an immobile relationship with time. The recycling of words is a verbal trace of, and in, literature that is making an effort to keep something from slipping away by saying the same things again. Endeavouring to render static language that is moving through time, this example of Yeats's repetition is conceivable as part of the poem's response to what portraits do: they hold. And so, among the representations of the men and women who mattered to the poet, poetry itself aspires to clinch, or stage, presence in art as if William Butler Yeats's 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited' is, here, at one with John Butler Yeats's fidgety desire to record the supposed essence—what Æ calls 'soul'—in visual form. Both father and son are persuaded, for a moment only it might be, by the illusion of instilling, or stilling, individual essence on paper. Educated in part as an artist in the Metropolitan School of Art on Thomas Street, William Butler Yeats has, for an instant, merged verse with studio. The Oedipal task is briefly suspended.

What, aside from the ancient effort of distinguishing oneself from one's father, might be psychically at stake in these moments where poetry communicates a sense of presence? Particularly where it communicates a sense of the coherent nature of a single personality? The answer, in part, must lie in the allure of coherence itself. At the most general level, the illusion of psychic wholeness—the fiction that human personalities are coherent as well as representable, wholly knowable by their traits—is of persistent attraction in human narratives of ourselves. Images of psychic cohesion, of our lives as having a story, undertake necessary work in, apart from anything else, hiding the disarray and discontinuations of actual existence, as well as our profound unknowableness to other human beings and, to an extent, ourselves. Sir Frank Kermode observes aptly that, as readers and human beings, 'we are in love with the idea of

¹⁹ In the sense explored in Francis O'Gorman, 'Yeats's Disappointments', *International Yeats Studies*, 1.2 (2017), available at: <http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys/vol1/iss2/3>.

fulfilment'.²⁰ And that fulfilment is part of a way of confirming to ourselves and others the sense that things make and, in turn, avoiding recognition of the fragmentation, randomness, and accidents of life in the midst (to use another of Kermode's valuable terms).²¹ These are broad features of human consciousness that have been particularly important not only to literary criticism and the hunger for story but for psychoanalysis, with its permanent inquiry into what narratives might help us make sense of our troubles.

And for Yeats, the general attraction of the notion of human wholeness—that character, as I have been suggesting here, can be apparently captured in a gesture in words—is intensified, it must be, by the poet's long contemplation of the role of masks in the projection of personality. The illusion of psychic wholeness, the fascination with the idea that occasionally poetry could trade in moments of portraiture, offers an alternative to the mask as a way of defining an individual's reality. Yeats's poetry, in those rare instances that communicate the illusion of human presence, envisages in words an alternative to the mask: the possibility of a person being wholly him or herself, legible in, and through, language. What Yeats's poetry of presence calls up in part, then, is an attractive fantasy of human coherence that both disguises the psychic messiness of actuality and, more particularly for Yeats, allows him a moment to dream what it might be like not to have a mask. For a poet of opposites, Yeats, in full Blakean mode, espies in verbal portraiture the seductive power of the anti-mask.

The forms of presence I am considering involve Yeats's poetry's contact with an imagined version of lived reality. I am concerned with those surprising occasions when his writing leaves his reader with a sense of contact, of meeting, with real things or people. Little, one might think, could have made Yeats more conscious of poetry's relationship with experience, the business of

²⁰ Sir Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 65. Cf. Lionel Trilling's similar observation, 'Try as we may, we cannot, as we write history, escape our purposiveness', 'The Sense of the Past' from *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (London: Mercury, 1961, first published 1950), pp. 181-97 (p. 188).

²¹ A term of importance throughout *The Sense of An Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

inhabiting real time, peopled with real characters and things, than the Easter Rising and the subsequent Irish War of Independence and then the Civil War. Yeats did not think that war poetry was anything other an oxymoron, excluding, in turn, most, though not all, of the First World War poets from his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936). (The role of Irish soldiers in the First World War was, of course, a topic of division: Yeats's decision in the anthology is partly a characteristic avoidance of seeming to take a public view.) Yeats's certainty that poets had no gift to set a statesman right was a confident, as well as a tactical, acknowledgement that poetry inhabited a different realm from politics where one might both gain and lose agreement.

And yet the Civil War in particular could hardly have been ignored by a poet who had become in significant ways the voice of Ireland herself. So it is suggestive that the Civil War poems, such as they are, have an uncomfortable, a qualified, relationship with the experienced as it is recorded, and recordable, in poetry. Portions of these poems do, briefly, involve an invitation to meet, in imaginary language, the lived world. Yet they are also remarkably anxious or evasive about it, playing out obliquely in compromises and uncertainties Yeats's deep trouble with taking a side, with committing himself publicly to a stand amid profound and violent division. Here is Yeats's great trouble with a particular form of presence: with poetry's relationship with, and contact of, the factual reality of a world of divided opinion where blood is being shed.

Revealingly, the accommodation of the actual, in 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', first published in 1923 in *The Dial* and included in *The Tower*, is double-sided. And that seems all the more interesting in the context of the War, considered in a poem where the question of the presence of fact becomes, at the poem's end, a matter of explicit rumination, as if poetic presence is so tricky in such a context it must nearly be addressed directly. The commencement of this mournful poem, as is obvious enough, is possible to read without understanding anything of the history of the Civil War. The text's early contemplation of the indifference of ancestral houses tells the uninformed reader nothing directly about the conflict between pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty forces; about, say, the difference between Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera;

about the fatal divisions in the IRA. Reality in any plain sense is inaccessible through this verse that begins with Homer, sea-shells, peacocks, and escutcheoned doors. So, easily, it might be thought that the poem more locally, in the reading experience, summons no vivid sense of the lived moment, no occasion of the illusion of the empirically realised.

And yet that is not quite so. Ancestral houses in the abstract give way, in 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', for an instant, in the second section, to Cato's sword. That ancient weapon, forged before Chaucer was born, lies on Yeats's desk as it now lies in a glass cabinet in the National Library of Ireland in Dublin. The sword is real enough. But the most suggestive moment of the poet's envisaging of the meeting between the reader and the actual is in the fourth section, where Yeats recollects an encounter at Thoor Ballylee with an anti-Treaty soldier. 'An affable Irregular', Yeats writes,

A heavily-built Falstaffian man,
Comes cracking jokes of civil war
As though to die by gunshot were
The finest play under the sun.

A brown Lieutenant and his men,
Half dressed in national uniform,
Stand at my door, and I complain
Of the foul weather, hail and rain,
A pear-tree broken by the storm.

I count those feathered balls of soot
The moor-hen guides upon the stream.
To silence the envy in my thought;

And turn towards my chamber, caught
In the cold snows of a dream.

(*V*, pp. 423-4, ll. 1-15)

Although a man without a name, the Irregular brings into Yeats's poem for a second or two the historical moment and the illusion of actuality. The anti-Treaty officer and his half-uniformed men in brown are the living evidence of an Ireland divided, watched by a poet who is literally on the threshold: standing at his door. That location makes material a form of neutrality, a not taking sides, a not-being-in-one-place-alone. If here is a political point secreted in a physical detail, it is the physical itself that is noticeable more amply: a mundane conversation about the weather, the damage done to a tree. The presence of the real, of poetry transacting with memory, is studiously ordinary. But it is presence, all the same, as clearly realised as those 'feathered balls of soot', the moor-hen chicks, which Yeats counts, as once he had the swans at Coole. The poem makes those little birds remarkably visible, flashing for an instant on the inward eye in the exactness of Yeats's description.

Yet as Yeats retreats, here, from the actual into the 'cold snows of a dream' so the sixth, the penultimate, portion of 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' stages more openly a debate, or at least an anxiety, about facts in relation to the imaginative textures of Yeats's poetry. That sixth portion invites the reader to wonder more acutely about the real in relationship to metaphor and the figurative, and to associate that reluctance with the advantages of public political uncertainty. 'We are closed in', Yeats writes,

and the key is turned
On our uncertainty; somewhere
A man is killed, or a house burned,

Yet no clear fact to be discerned:
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

A barricade of stone or of wood;
Some fourteen days of civil war;
Last night they trundled down the road
That dead young soldier in his blood:
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

(*V*, p. 425, ll. 6-20)

Nowhere, I think, is Yeats's poetry in a more divided relationship with the presence of the actual. Details of the War take the reader into the historical moment. But they do so only approximately for the poet keeps the local, the tangible, both there and at arm's length. '[S]omewhere | A man is killed, a house is burned' gives us, for instance, both a glimpse of an actual episode in the War and a level of generality which makes that glimpse impossibly imprecise. And Yeats's assertion, amid what is clearly rumour and the circulation of incomplete accounts, that there is 'no clear fact to be discerned' is provocative—and it might be self-conscious. At the most abstract level, it is difficult to read that line without thinking of Yeats in the doorway: placing himself as undecided, neither on the Treaty side nor the anti-Treaty (at least in public). But at another level, the line quietly invites the reader to wonder about the poem's own trafficking with facts: its figuring of the visualisable real and its retreat from so doing. The poetry of civil war summons the presence of the real with great reluctance even as the real presses hard upon it.

This doubleness in relation to the verifiable is a feature of another political poem, this time on the Easter Rising, which—differently—keeps the real at a distance but not entirely. 'The O'Rahilly' is a poem that appears to be giving us history when it is not. Again, reflecting on the poetics of this poem obliges the reader to wonder once more about what is at stake in Yeats's

contact in verse with actuality when the context is one of national turmoil. If presence in poetry constitutes a form of meeting, there are some meetings too risky to make.

‘The O’Rahilly’—the definite article is a contested Irish squire-like honorific, which was self-chosen in The O’Rahilly’s case but largely accepted despite its doubtfulness—relates the history of the death of Michael Joseph O’Rahilly (1875-1916) in a retreat from the General Post Office. Caught in a diagonal slash of machine-gun fire, The O’Rahilly was to die in what is now O’Rahilly Parade, off Henry Street (then it was Sackville Lane). He died only, Yeats claims, after writing his epitaph in his own blood upon the wall of his final shelter. This is the whole poem:

Sing of The O’Rahilly,
Do not deny his right;
Sing a ‘The’ before his name;
Allow that he, despite
All those learned historians,
Established it for good;
He wrote out that word himself,
He christened himself with blood.

How goes the weather?

Sing of The O’Rahilly
That had such little sense
He told Pearse and Connolly
He’d gone to great expense
Keeping all the Kerry men
Out of that crazy fight;
That he might be there himself

Had travelled half the night.

How goes the weather?

‘Am I such a craven that

I should not get the word

But for what some travelling man

Had heard I had not heard?’

Then on Pearse and Connolly

He fixed a bitter look:

‘Because I helped to wind the clock

I come to hear it strike.’

How goes the weather?

What remains to sing about

But of the death he met

Stretched under a doorway

Somewhere off Henry Street;

They that found him found upon

The door above his head

‘Here died The O’Rahilly.

R.I.P.’ writ in blood.

How goes the weather?

(*V*, pp. 584-5, ll. 1-36).

This is, unusually though not uniquely, Yeats writing about a real event on the streets of Dublin.

The O’Rahilly did indeed drive up for the Rising, after initially trying to avert it (though there is no evidence for the clock-striking comment). He did die in a doorway ‘Somewhere off Henry

Street'. And he did write some words after his mortal injury. Yeats's poem, if not a verbal portrait, is still in contact with history; it offers us presence of a kind.

But it does not do so entirely. For 'The O'Rahilly' makes a great compromise with the actual. What The O'Rahilly wrote was not such an austere piece of self-confident certainty in his own name. He actually, and in ink, wrote a brief letter to Nannie, his American wife, bidding her farewell and instructing those who found him to deliver the letter to her. This letter, now in the National Library, remains one of the saddest of documents from the Rising. Ending 'Goodbye darling', the letter itself, exactly rendered, forms the substance of Shane Cullen's 2005 memorial to The O'Rahilly on the site of his death. Yeats might simply be repeating a garbled account of The O'Rahilly's death, not having sought to confirm it.²² That in itself suggests an awkwardness with the presence of the actual. But it is also possible that Yeats might, rather, be deliberately keeping away from the real, and the private letter of a man's valediction to his wife, by changing it. It is possible that the text is, in turn, more sharply divided about poetry's responsibility to the empirically experienced at times of national significance than anywhere else in Yeats's writing. Yeats's presences are rare moments; they are not his characteristic voice. And in periods of violent unrest, any quiet sense of duty to recognize Ireland's lived experience in the imagined reach of verse left him divided, or simply silent. The poetry of presence retreats, under such circumstances, from the meetings it has, or could have, made.

And there is one further, and final, moment of interest where words and presence become the topic of Yeats's poetry. And they become so in a way that peculiarly exposes *ourselves as readers*, caught up in Yeats's long preference for the symbol, or the dramatically elevated, over the real. Yeats had remembered, in *Autobiographies* (1926), a childhood moment near Holland Park in London when he had felt a great longing 'for a sod of earth from some field I knew, something

²² I have not been able to find any contemporary notice of the manner of The O'Rahilly's death. The most extensive to my knowledge was that reported in *The Times* in London, which was simply: 'The O'Rahilly is dead. His body has been found near the ruins of the Post Office, and it is surmised that he was shot as he tried to escape from the blazing building', 'Rebels' Expanding Bullets', *The Times*, 5 May 1916, p. 5.

of Sligo to hold in my hand'. Contact, physical touch of the actual, signified a desire of belonging, a feeling that was so strong, as Yeats recalls, that he was embarrassed, knowing his mother had brought them up 'to laugh at all display of emotion'.²³ But something of that desire for the touchable soil of Sligo, for presence in a very material sense, remained ineradicable even to the end. And so, literally at the end, when Yeats left Ireland to die in France, he purposed that his body should be brought back in due course, without pomp and ceremony, and re-interred in Sligo. In turn, Yeats's final poem on the thought of that future death is the last of Yeats's imagining of presence in poetry, a final reflection on the topics that I have been considering here.

Yeats, in a celebrated manner, writes his own epitaph in 'Under Ben Bulbin' from *Final Poems* (1938-9). It is a text dated 4 September 1938, less than four months before the poet's death on 28 January the following year. The final section of the poem brings this poet of cycles, of perning gyres, back to where he started, and back to one of the two eternities: that of race. The soil of Sligo now prepares to hold his physical presence, literally. 'Under Ben Bulbin's head', Yeats writes:

In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid.

An ancestor was rector there

Long years ago, a church stands near,

By the road an ancient cross.

No marble, no conventional phrase;

On limestone quarried near the spot

By his command these words are cut:

²³ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 31.

Cast a cold eye
On Life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!

(*V*, p. 640, ll.84-94)

Here is, plainly enough, another Coole Park-like moment of verbal immersion in an actual place: Drumcliff churchyard beneath the instantly recognizable shape of the rock formation of Ben Bulbin, part of the Dartry Mountains. From Yeats's grave, Ben Bulbin is visible beyond the trees on the edge of the churchyard. The Reverend William Butler Yeats (1806-62), father of John Butler Yeats, had, indeed, served as rector of Drumcliff church. And outside the churchyard in the grounds of the now lost monastery stand, in fact, not one but three High Crosses: one, highly decorated with biblical scenes might, perhaps, date from the eleventh century.

Yeats's poem leans, as it were, into a future time but also into a real place as he marks how his grave should look, a pre-vision of a scene that will contain presence in its most literal sense: the poet's body. The exactly observed site, the real place, is the verbal corollary, perhaps, of the actuality in the grave. (I set to one side the recent revelation that Yeats's bones are probably not in the grave or, if any are, they are mixed with those of others.²⁴) But, importantly for the topic I have been considering, this last poem makes a final transaction with the real: it gives us actuality and then, swiftly, evades it. Here is the final gesture of Yeats's art of occasional, and then reluctant, presence.

The contact of Yeats's poetry with life in the midst, with experiential or imaginable reality, is, indeed, only to be brief. Yeats, that is to say, in 'Under Ben Bulbin', commands his reader not

²⁴ See the article in the *Irish Times*, 18 July 2015, accessible here: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/yeats-papers-confirm-bones-sent-to-sligo-were-not-poet-s-1.2288662>, last accessed 18.xii.18.

to attend to a local place but to turn away, to leave the literal site of a starkly literal presence and be re-immersed in the elevated language of Yeats's most characteristic voice. The epitaph takes the reader back to high purposes, abstracted and heroic figures, noble spiritual detachment. The forms of meeting, of recognition and closeness, which are implied in Yeats's rare turn to the language of presence are reversed in these words of finality: not meeting but leaving, not connection but departure. Endeavouring to speak to us directly not merely from the tomb but on the tomb, Yeats sends us on our way. And, leaving, we are transformed by the poet's demanded, and demanding, words from actual visitors—from real presences—into mysterious, nobly detached horsemen, admirably indifferent to matters of the sublunary, as if we have become part of a legend in the *aos sí*. The conclusion to the story of Yeats's presences, then, is that, as he addresses us at and from the grave, he moves us on, both from being there and from our literal real selves. Our physical presence, as we stand with Ben Bulbin in view in Drumcliff churchyard, is taken away from us and we become figures in Yeats's magnificent drama of Ireland. Presence, in the basic sense of our own literal presence as visitors to his grave, is, at the last, changed utterly.

Yeats's re-interpretation of his father's art, and his exploration of the poetry of presence more generally, provides a fresh perspective on a poet of whom John Butler Yeats once wrote: 'I wish Willie had Jack's tender gracious manner, and did not sometimes treat me as if I was a black beetle'.²⁵ Colm Tóibín elegantly tells us that Yeats's anger with John Butler Yeats was mutated in the poetry into generosity. But the nature of that poetry's uncertain contact with the presence of the real, his father's artistic domain, tells a more convincing story of ambiguity, changefulness, and division.

²⁵ J.B. Yeats: *Letters to His Son W.B. Yeats and Others*, ed. Joseph Hone (London: Faber, 1944), p.78 (letter to Lily, summer 1904).